



Sherman Kishi



“I did talk to my father before I went into the service and he said, ‘This is your country. If that’s what you want to do, you just go ahead.’ So he accepted my going into the service.”

Down a tucked away country road in Livingston, California sits a ranch-style house, welcoming guests with a driveway full of poppies. Adjacent to this house lies lush farmland filled with almond trees and fields of sweet potatoes. This land, and its 230 acres, belong to the Kishi family, who have looked over it and cultivated produce from it for over 100 years. A strong co-op and excellent planning allowed the Kishis and other Japanese American farmers in the area - called Yamato Colony - to keep their land throughout the war. "Everyone got their land back, we all had our property back. The manager of the trusteeship came to camp several times during the war years to report on what he was doing," says Sherman, one of the Kishi brothers who has since retired from farming. What started off as grapes on 40 acres purchased by Sherman's father in the early 1900s turned into a renowned agricultural mecca of Japanese sweet potatoes (*satsumaimo*) and almonds.

At 92 years old, Sherman is retired from farming but remains an active leader in the Central Valley Japanese American community, giving talks throughout the year about his time spent in the camp Granada (Amache) in Colorado and spearheading historical projects like the [Merced Assembly Center Memorial](#). As a veteran of the Military Intelligence Service (MIS), Sherman was awarded the Congressional Gold Medal from President Obama in 2010, a testament to his invaluable service as a translator/interpreter in the Pacific theater.

I interviewed Sherman at his beautiful Livingston home, where he's lived with his wife, June since 1946. Longevity and deep roots seem to be a cornerstone of the Kishi's life: The house where Sherman was born still stands across the street and this year, Sherman and June will celebrate their 72nd anniversary. "Most people don't make it that long," he says.

When did your family first migrate to America?

My father came to the United States in 1903 when he was 18 years old. And he came into Seattle and came down into California as a farm laborer and he was up and down the Valley for a number of years. I think between 1910 and 1913 he settled here in Livingston. My mother was a picture bride, basically. I think the families knew each other in Japan and it was arranged there. She was teaching in Japan and she left teaching and came to the United States and stayed here all the rest of her life.

Do you know why your father came to the United States?

I know the reason. My father went with his cousin to Tokyo from Wakayama to take a test to get into the military, to be officers in the military. And he passed the written test very well but he had one deaf ear. So he was rejected for service, thank goodness. So he didn't go home to Wakayama before he left for the United States. He was so disappointed, I guess. And the cousin that he had was inducted into the military and became a general before the war. He just left Japan.

So your father was completely by himself?

Yes, as far as I know by himself.

So he made it down to this area, and he began to farm because that's what everyone else was doing?

Up and down the valley was lots of farming, seasonal of course. They commuted up and down the valley and he made friends as he was doing that.

So he bought this property?

This area is called Yamato Colony. Mr. Abiko from San Francisco came to the United States in about 1885 and he was a relatively well-educated man and became involved in the newspaper. In fact he started the *Nichi Bei*.

He and some friends saw these migrant workers going up and down and spending their money in San Francisco, blowing it. So I guess that's why he thought he'd start a community. And several of them talked about it and

became friends and decided they'd look for a place to start a community. And they came down into the valley, looked around, and decided on Livingston because the water was so good. And so they bought I think 2,000 acres to begin with and opened it up for Japanese people to immigrate into. And they sold the land to the people who came in. It actually started with two communities--there's a Cressy, which is adjacent to Livingston. This is in 1906 that it began just at the time of the earthquake. And so there were about six or seven families who came after the earthquake into Livingston.

And it's interesting that this is one community that never had a Buddhist Church in it. In all the years we've been in it, it's always been a Christian church. Abiko was also a Christian and so, it became a Christian community. It's been that way ever since.

And why the name Yamato?

Yamato of course is Old Japan. But that's not why they started it that way. There was what they called a yam station just north of Atwater and Abiko had gone up and down the area looking for a place to settle. So he took that name - the "yam station" plus Atwater - and made a "Yamato out of it. That's the story that we hear. This area is very famous for sweet potatoes. It's probably the center of sweet potatoes for California. And California raises probably the third state in sweet potato production.

So what do you grow on your farm?

Things change over the years. When they first started, they first started with grapes, that was the main crop in the old, old days. In order to survive until the grapes came into the bearing, they used to raise sweet potatoes and strawberries in-between. Before the war, the grape price became so bad, it rarely made any money. But during the wartime years, the price went sky high and people with grapes made a lot of money.

We were gone but fortunately in Livingston, Cressy and Cortez, we were very active in cooperatives. Livingston had its first selling cooperative started in 1915. When 9066 was signed, there was a curfew and they said you can't go more than five miles. But Livingston is about five miles from

Cressy, and Cortez was about four miles; it was about four miles from each side. So they got together and decided that they would form a trusteeship. They hired a gentleman who worked for Bank of America for many years and he ran the trusteeship and so all the land that was in the cooperatives was protected during the war years.

They leased it out to other people and they had a couple of two or three friendly men that were the trustees and there was a manager who was hired to operate all this. And he ran it and did very well. There was a very trusted secretary that was part of the co-op before the war and she watched it carefully and made sure that everything was okay. And everyone got their land back, we all had our property back. And actually, the manager of the trusteeship came to the camp several times during the war years to report on what he was doing.

All the way to Colorado?

All the way to Colorado, yep. So that worked out very well. Some ranches weren't kept up too well, others were kept up quite well. But the mortgages that had to be paid were paid, and the taxes were paid so nobody lost their land. It was very well thought-out and worked out very well in Livingston, Cortez and Cressy.

Because of that, was your father and your family more relaxed when they went into camp?

They didn't know how it was going to work out, basically. They hoped it would work out well, I'm sure. But at least something was done to all the farms, as opposed to individual farmers trying to do what they could. So that worked out very well. But my father



had a little out with the
cooperative before the war.

Sherman holds his Congressional Gold Medal that he was awarded in 2010.

So he wasn't a part of the co-op. But we found a teacher at the high school and we didn't know he was a Mormon, a Latter Day Saint. And we asked him to run our ranch for us and he did a good job and put money in the bank for us. So we were very fortunate and had all our land back.

When they came to recruit in the camp, the first group that came in was to recruit was for the 442. And a lot of my friends went into the 442nd Regiment. And they came in just shortly thereafter looking for people for MIS, Military Intelligence Service. They started that school in the Presidio in San Francisco, and before the war. I think in October of 1941, the school was started and it became the head of the language part was John Aiso, he became a Lieutenant Colonel in the end. Soon as the Japanese people moved, they had to do something. So they moved the camp to Camp Savage in Minnesota. When I enlisted in November of 1943, I was sent to Camp Savage to learn the language.

When the loyalty questionnaire came out, how did your family answer?

I think my family all answered yes. I'm not sure what my father did, because they were Isseis. If they answered yes, especially on the second question, they wouldn't have a country, since they couldn't become citizens. I'm not sure how he answered. But I did talk to my father before I went into the service and he said, "This is your country. If that's what you want to do you just go ahead." So he accepted my going into the service.

Were your parents ever worried for you going into the military?

I have no idea how they felt about it, really.

So you had friends that were also going to the MIS?

Most of my MIS friends. The draft was cut off when 9066 happened, there was no longer a draft for the Japanese. And it didn't come back until January of 1944. So I volunteered before the draft was started. After the draft was

started, there were quite a number of people who went to MIS language school in '45 and '46, and of course the war was over in '45. So there were friends of mine that went to language school but I'm not sure how much they learned or anything, I was gone by then.

Can you describe your training for this intensive Japanese school?

That was the toughest school I ever went to--it was tough. We had to learn a set number of Kanjis, in a certain period of time. Now the Hawaiian kids had no problem really because they learned a lot of Japanese in Hawai'i. So most of my friends were Hawaiian kids but those of us from the states and didn't have much Japanese, we studied with flashlights, in the bathroom after lights went out. Oh yeah, we did a lot of that.

Was Kanji the hardest part for you?

Oh yeah. It was very difficult.

And who were the teachers?

The teachers were almost all Kibei who had gone to Japan and were educated. This John Aiso, who became the head of the language school, was really a well-educated man. He had gone back to Japan, went to college, learned Japanese, and also went to college here. They found his record and got him. They had to convince him to stay in the service because he was almost out of the service, I think he was well in his late 20s. So they convinced him to stay and become the head of the language school. He became a judge later after the war.

After you were in training, you were aware that it was leading up to the occupation of Japan?

Yes, we expected that all along. The first thing was we got shipped out of San Francisco in July of 1945 and we were sent to the Philippines. They had ATIS--Allied Translation and Interpreter Section--part of the U.S. army and we were stationed close to Manila. We were there about the end of July and of course the atom bomb was dropped in the middle of August. So in

September they sent us right into Japan as part of ATIS.

What were some of your memories of being there?

Well, one of the most vivid memories I have of it is when we went by ship to Yokohama, and it's about 20 miles from Tokyo. They had some of the big government buildings still standing there in Tokyo. We were stationed in the NYK (Nippon Yusen Kaisha) building. That trip from Yokohama to Tokyo was by train. And for 20 miles it was all black, all burnt out. It was incredible. I think actually the death toll in Tokyo was worse than in Hiroshima because of the incendiary. Everything in Japan was made out of paper and wood so everything burnt up like paper. They say it was so bad that there was just no oxygen and people died from a lack of oxygen. It was so severe, the fires that they had.

A lot of MIS veterans remember the children wandering around, looking for food. Do you remember seeing a lot of kids?

Yes I remember that, I remember those kids. They used to go into the subway at nighttime because it was so cold. We went into the first winter there in Tokyo. There were a lot of homeless kids, small kids, just running around looking for whatever they could find. It was pretty sad.

Interestingly, us Nisei, we looked just like the Japanese people but we were wearing American uniforms. And so they treated us really well. We got to be friendly with quite a few of them.

Did you ever get a sense if they were grateful for you being there?

Well I don't know if they were grateful for our being there *[laughs]*. We beat them. They were vanquished. They accepted those of us who could speak their language quite well. And we visited quite a few people who we got to know over there.

Your services were required to translate Japanese military documents?

Yeah, all military stuff. There were code books and things that we translated. I don't know how much I translated, I don't think very much, I

just didn't have that much Japanese background.

Were you part of any interrogations?

I was assigned to a British major. I was in the General Headquarters building, which was the Daiichi building, where General MacArthur was. That thing was only about six stories high. I was stationed on the bottom floor, interpreting for this British major. We went to the prison there and saw quite a few of the prisoners. I had to interpret for this British Major who was looking into the Black Dragon Society.

That was a famous sort of a secretive society in Japan before the war. I'm not sure if it had military people but this guy was a civilian that we went to interview, he was the head of it. They offered us tea, the British Major wouldn't drink it, he was so scared he was going to get poisoned. I had no problem drinking the tea. [laughs]

How would you characterize your experience in Japan? Was it upsetting to see what the military did or did you just feel like you had a job to do?

I think I just really felt like I had a job to do and if we had some translating or interpreting we did that. Nothing profound, I'm sure. We just enjoyed our stay in Japan. Right before I left Japan, I got a leave and went to visit my relatives in Wakayama in 1946. Of course I had never met any of them. And my father, he came in 1903, but he never came back to Japan even once. Apparently he just didn't care to go. But I went to visit them, and I just felt like I went home.

They welcomed you.

Yeah, they did. They were very poor, everybody was very poor in Japan. There was nothing there, you know. When we visited some people in Tokyo, they would serve us sweet potato--baked sweet potato sliced--that's all they had, basically. That's the other thing I remember very clearly. All these young girls probably in their early teens, would carry a knapsack, with their belongings in it and going to the country to barter for food. And most of the

food they could barter for was sweet potatoes. I remember that very clearly.

Even though they were poor, were you relieved that your family wasn't too affected by the war?

It was an intact area and the people were better off there than in Tokyo. My father's nephew sort of took us around and he was in the service. He was one of the lucky ones that got back from Manchuria very early. So he was back by the beginning of 1946. He was very fortunate.

As that was happening, what was going on in Amache with your family?

Amache was closed towards the end of 1945. My folks came back I think in April of 1945.

Still relatively early.

And our house was shot by people who didn't want us back. There are still bullet holes in the house. There were several shootings that went on during that period of time in April, May in 1945. My brother came back from the service, he got drafted after I went into the service, he's older than I am. He came home to try and get some help from the local law enforcement. He actually went before the supervisors and asked them for help to make sure this kind of thing doesn't happen. But they said they didn't have any money and nobody wants us back anyway *[laughs]* So they didn't get involved.

Did you feel afraid for your parents?

Well, we were a little upset with our house being shot, you know. But there's nothing you can do when you're in the service and far away.

I imagine that's really unsettling.

Yeah, it was a little unsettling at the time that such a thing could happen.

While in camp, did your parents farm?

My father had Bright's disease, and that's kidney disease before the war. So

my brother was actually going to UC Berkeley for one year when had to come home to help on the ranch. So we went into the camp my father was not well. Of course, he didn't do anything. My mother used to get food from the kitchen and sort of prepare it on a hot plate in the barrack for him so he would have food that wasn't salty and stuff.

And so he didn't have to get medical treatment?

I don't know if he had any medical treatment, I don't think he did. There was a hospital there but it wasn't much of a hospital. So he survived through it and came home and he died in 1945, about six months after he came home. So he lived through it until he came back which was wonderful for him. At least he got back.

How old was he?

I think he died at 64. My mother lived to be 86.

In camp, when you were there, what were some of your memories?

Our church is just a quarter of a mile from here and that's why they came after us. But we also were farmers and we had trucks, so we took a lot more than we could carry. They never objected to us taking additional things if we got it into camp. From there when they went to Colorado, they just put it on the train and took it all for us.

That sounds rare.

It was pretty rare. There were a lot of people that did, in the area. My mother took a sewing machine, and I had my saxophone, normally you wouldn't take something like that. Took a lot more than most people were able to.

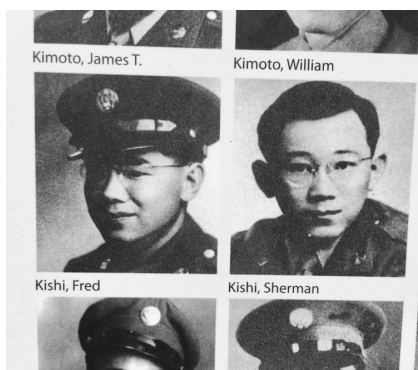
I've never heard of anyone being able to put extra things on the train.

We just took it over there and it was all unloaded in the assembly center and we took it into our barrack and when we left, we took it out to where they were shipping things and it all went to Colorado.

So how long were you actually in Amache?

I was there from September of 1942 to until November of 1943 when I went into the service. I didn't turn 18 until I was a year in camp. I went into the assembly center, the notice came out on the walls and said you had to be there by a certain date. Well, the date was May the 13th, 1942. That was my 17th birthday. They had put up enough barracks to house about 5,000 people in Merced.

Were you planning on going to college?



Military photos of Sherman and his older brother, Fred are displayed on plaques at the Merced Assembly Center Memorial. "From this small community there were a lot of us that went into the service. I think from Cortez and Livingston, there were sixty young men. And there weren't that many Japanese people," says Sherman.

I had hoped to go to college. My senior year in high school was in camp. My senior year was basically a lost year for me because they started late, we didn't start until November. It was sort of a high school and they were all people within the camp itself that became teachers. We had a lot of well-educated people in camp but I didn't learn anything. I lost my senior in high school. I really found out when I went to college, in Berkeley. I had no advanced algebra, I had no chemistry, I had no physics. So the classes I took had to have that as a basic understand and I had to learn all of that on my own, so it was a tough couple of years for me in college.

The military did come to recruit, for the 442 and for MIS. I remember when they first came, I wasn't 18 yet. A lot of my friends did volunteer and went into the service.

You were lucky.

Yeah, three of our community didn't come back. I think they got killed in France when they fought for the Lost Battalion. I think in one of those fights, we lost three young men.

I've heard from some MIS veterans that they felt lucky that they were spared. It could've been any one of them to go into the 442.

Yeah, it could've been very well. But we lost a number of men in the MIS as well that were in the fights in the Pacific. It wasn't completely safe, in fact it was dangerous because they had a Japanese face and they had to be careful of their own men. In fact one guy that was in Livingston, he was a Sergeant, and he became the caretaker for one of the translators because they had to have some American white guy with them to make sure they would be safe. It was not a good thing.

But they did a tremendous job in the Pacific as well. And most of that was done by the Kibei. They were the ones that did most of the translating and interpreting because they knew the language so well. I think most of the Nisei who didn't know the language well like myself did most of the writing, who probably understood enough to know what was being said.

How was coming back home after the war? Did you experience any discrimination?



The memorial centerpiece at the Merced County Fairgrounds. The suitcases are all real, casted in bronze.

You know, that's interesting. We really didn't experience very much of that. I think it happened before I came back. There were resolutions passed in the town of Merced, Livingston, Turlock, saying they didn't want the Japanese people back. This was in 1945. And there were some incidents of people that came back early and there were other places that also got shot. And other incidents where the barber wouldn't give them haircuts and things like that. Those things happened.

As a matter of fact there's that story about Dan Inouye, the senator who had only one arm. He tried to get a haircut and they wouldn't give him one. They said, "We don't give Japs haircuts." Can you imagine? He's in uniform, and he lost an arm in the service and he had all those medals on his chest. It's just the hatred that happens.

Do your children know your story?

We didn't talk to the kids about camp life, we talked about camp life with our friends but we never talked about camp life to our kids. They basically learned it in school. We didn't really feel very comfortable about it until after redress was developed and Reagan signed the bill. After they gave us the redress, it just really relieved all of us who had been in the camp. Because camp was sort of a feeling of shame, that you had to be in a place like that. So we didn't talk about it. But after that, we felt much more freer to talk about it. There's always the chance of something like this happening again. We need to keep speaking about it and keep it in people's minds that it did happen.

Lastly, do you mind sharing the story of how did you and June met?

That's a story I always tell when I go to speak. Remember how I said there was a curfew, we couldn't go more than five miles? June was actually born in Cortez which is seven miles from here but they had moved to several places in the area before that. Just before the war she was more than five miles away.

So, I went to visit her, and I didn't get caught because there's no sheriffs out, no police out, so I got along fine.

She's a couple years older than I am and she had finished school and was working. I sort of went around with her at the high school but not that much. And so we were in the same camp, went to the assembly center together and used to see her around at Amache all the time. So, I didn't get caught and she was my girlfriend. We got married later and in September of this year we'll be married 72 years. Every time we tell the story the kids clap.



Sherman and June at the Merced Assembly Center Memorial